

NEPAD Commentary: The First Wave

Review of:

Rachel Hayman, Kenneth King and Simon McGrath (eds.). *The New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD): Internal and External Visions*. Centre for African Studies, University of Edinburgh. 2003.

Holger Bernt Hansen and Maj-Britt Johanssen (eds.). *The Challenge of the New Partnership for Africa's Development, NEPAD*. University of Copenhagen, North/South Priority Research Area. 2003.

Nepad was officially launched in October 2001. Commentary was initially slow in coming, but soon turned into a flood in 2002, unabated in 2003. An independent website maintained by the Southern African Regional Poverty Network (SARPN), <http://www.sarpn.org.za/nepadall.php>, now lists more than a hundred items related to Nepad. The two publications reviewed here bring together papers presented at conferences held in 2002, but published in 2003.

The papers in these collections reflect the tempo, and the temper, of the wide range of discussions so far. There are the “new dawn” statements of African politicians in the forefront of the Nepad process; the forced enthusiastic welcome from aid bureaucrats—wary and wary of new initiatives, but going with the current flow; the attacks of those analysts associated with earlier African initiatives which did not meet with the same positive donor reactions; relatedly, the critiques of scholars who see Nepad as a neo-liberal Trojan Horse; and complaints from civil society about lack of consultation in developing the initial document. Every now and then, however, in these volumes and in the general discourse, there are papers that do not see Nepad as a morality play set against grand themes, but as having the potential for small, concrete, improvements in the lives of Africans.

It is my view, from reading these papers and from reading the general debate, that both the proponents and the opponents of Nepad are arguing on too grand a scale. The proponents are in danger of taking too much on; and the opponents are in danger of losing a good opportunity to do some small things right, in the process of opposing the grand schemes of the proposers in equally grand terms.

So what is new about Nepad? Certainly not the debate on the “Washington Consensus”. This debate will go on, and in any case, the Lagos Plan of Action (LPA) of the 1980's put as much emphasis on the role of a well regulated private sector as the Nepad documents do on the role of a well functioning government (which is to say, quiet a lot). And yet much of the debate centers on these sorts of issues, and many of the papers here and elsewhere rehash arguments and counterarguments that we are all now familiar with.

To my mind what is different about Nepad is two-fold. First, it is self consciously democratic in its roots and aspirations. Say what you will about the economic content of Nepad versus the LPA. The fact of the matter is that the Heads of State who initiated the Nepad process in 2000 were predominantly elected by their populations. The same cannot be said, not by a long shot, of those who were Heads of State when the LPA was launched in the early 1980's. Say what you will about the lack of consultation with civil society in the development of Nepad, and this criticism is indeed justified. But there was even less consultation on the LPA, and the flood of free speech and commentary from civil society in many countries in the last two years on Nepad is remarkable—a far cry from the dictatorial 1980's in these same countries.

Second, and related to the above, is the growing need in this globalizing world to have a strong and credible Africa-wide voice, a voice that draws its legitimacy and authority from being rooted in democratic principles. There are two directions in which this voice needs to speak---internally, to African nations, and externally, to the court of world opinion. Internally, there is a need to show the way, and to persuade and if necessary to sanction, African nations who stray from democracy and basic human rights, and this can best be done by other African nations, through an organization that is founded on these principles. Externally, Africa needs a voice to make alliances with those in the North who have Africa's interests at heart—on debt relief, on pharmaceutical prices, on international financial architecture. But the days when generals in uniforms could make these claims on behalf of Africa are gone. Africa's voice to the external world has to have a legitimacy born of democracy and human rights.

The above argument suggests a fairly narrow focus for Nepad as an institution—a mechanism for peer review on governance and rule of law, and a mechanism for representing Africa on key global issues. But the proponents of Nepad are expanding beyond these parameters of Nepad's comparative advantage. All sorts of national and sectoral economic policies, from exchange rates through investment codes to computers in schools, are now seen to be in Nepad's purview. In the international arena, Nepad seems to have taken on the task of increasing capital flows to Africa. Not surprisingly, critics are responding in the same broad sweep, and turning the discussion into a debate on development strategy, the colonial legacy, the need for a new international economic order, and so on. The donors, for their part, are also seen as revealing their true colors. Even before the "peer review mechanism" had been designed, they were setting out a litmus test on how Nepad would address the Mugabe issue in Zimbabwe, raising fears that Nepad would become conditionality by another name.

It is perhaps not surprising that the first wave of commentary on Nepad was as widespread in coverage as it turned out to be. Nepad's continued tendency to widen rather than narrow its remit does not hold out hope that the debate will narrow down to specifics. But if this tendency was indeed reversed, if Nepad settled down to using its moral authority in devising a regional peer review mechanism on governance, difficult as that will be to agree on, and to honing a small number of global-African issues to bring to the attention of the world, I believe it could make a contribution to African development.

This will require a toning down of expectations and rhetoric, on the part of the proponents and opponents of Nepad. The debates, specific ones on economic policy and general ones on the colonial legacy and the current world order, will go on at their own pace and rhythm. But a number of concrete achievements can be had with greater focus on Nepad's special strengths, and those achievements are surely worth striving for.

Ravi Kanbur
Cornell University
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